

Conference Report by Gudrun Löhner

Dr. Gudrun Löhner

John-F.-Kennedy-Institut für Nordamerikastudien

Abteilung Geschichte, Freie Universität Berlin

Lansstraße 7-9, 14195 Berlin

<http://jfki.fu-berlin.de>

Fon: +30.838 52604

Fax: +30.838 52873

Communicating Good Health: Movies, Medicine, and the Cultures of Risk in the Twentieth Century

Organizer:

Christian Bonah, Institut de Recherche Interdisciplinaires sur la Technologie et les Sciences (France);

Anja Laukoetter, Max Planck Institute for Human Development (Germany);

David Cantor, History Office, National Institutes of Health(USA)

26.05.2011-27.05.2011, Brocher Fondation, Geneva/Hermance, Switzerland

Since its early days cinema has played an important role in the history of health education and in the practices of visualization of medicine. Medicine and public health education are strongly connected to visual culture. Film can even be seen as a medical technology itself, as Lisa Cartwright, Ramon Reichert, Timothy Boon and others have demonstrated.[1]

Embarking on a still emerging field of study, the conference “Communicating Good Health” attracted a select but diverse and elaborate group of public health historians, film scholars, archivists, curators and public health professionals from a variety of European countries, Canada and the United States. The conference was held at the Brocher Fondation located ashore the beautiful Lake Geneva in Switzerland.

The story of public health films is, as the conveners pointedly introduced, a complex and complicated one. The films are neither entirely theatrical nor non-theatrical films, and the stakeholders are constantly changing; films were sponsored by public funds, public health organizations or even privately. A variety of questions concerning audiences, film perception, narrative strategies, but also propaganda and aesthetics re-emerged throughout the conference.

The question of the reception of specific films by specific audiences has been subject to considerable scholarly debate. Public health historians and film scholars discussed (just as the historical producers of these films did at the time) whether these films did have an impact on their audiences at all. Several papers touched upon the problem of the efficacy of these films. Using the metaphor of the truffle-hunter and the parachutist, TIMOTHY BOON (Science Museum, London) pleaded for the integration of audience research in the historical analysis of health films as a means to understand the operation of medical and health cultures in the past.

With contemplation to the history of science and emotions, ANJA LAUKOETTER (Max-Planck-Institute for Human Development, Berlin) talked about early film studies undertaken by experimental psychologists and social scientists. In the beginning of the 20th century, these scholars tried to measure the emotional impact of public health films. These studies revealed a gap between the strategies of health educators and research of psychologists. The latter tried to prove that narrative and other affective strategies had virtually no effect on audiences.

While Boon talked about historical audiences, WOLFGANG GAISSMAIER (Max-Planck-Institute for Human Development, Berlin) asked how ‘human animals’ today make decisions under risk or uncertainty. Drawing on recent research on the impact of audiovisual information, he discussed the efficacy of motion pictures and television programs dealing with health information and how movies can help in making informed decisions on issues such as cancer treatments.

Narrative strategies were a second major question. The films often apply a mixture between entertainment and education. The question was thus to which categories these films belong and whether it is possible to talk about these films as a genre. With a comparison of the educational, affective and narrative strategies of the French Bildungsroman and sex education films, ANITA GERTISER (University of Zurich) further sparked the ongoing methodological dispute whether film can be analyzed as text.

Crossing the lines between educational entertainment motion pictures and motion pictures for therapy, SCOTT CURTIS (Northwestern University, Evanston, IL) outlined post-World War Two film programs in the field of psychology and psychiatry. Since films were seen as “scientific instruments”, health professionals decided to make use of classical Hollywood narrative strategies. As a default choice, filmmakers used actors and actresses to tie into their audiences' viewing patterns with the intention to create docile viewers.

As narrative strategy, the alleviation of fear has been identified as a commonality of public health films, nonetheless, a variety of medical films tried to shock their audiences into compliance. This has particularly been the case with films on sexually transmitted diseases. MICHAEL SAPPOL (National Library of Medicine, Bethesda, MD) dealt with the larger ethical and moral implications of watching and exhibiting films that were originally produced for specialist audiences. In reference to films about children dying from rabies and leprosy, he discussed the affective dimension of this “cinema of difficult subjects” and the small dividing line between specialists' interests, voyeurism and horror.

Another conundrum the conference tackled was audio-visual aesthetics. VINCENT LOWY (University of Strasbourg) discussed John Ford's film *Sex Education* (1941). The film was produced for military audiences only and seen by millions of soldiers during the Second World War. Lowy raised questions about aesthetics and pointed to the distinct audio-visual language that came to be characterized as the US version of World War Two propaganda films.

With a focus on the “communication of good health” in a global context, KIRSTEN OSTHERR (Rice University, Houston, TX) examined the usage of animation in health films issued by the World Health Organization (WHO). Ostherr observed a post-World War Two change towards aesthetic modernism in the style of animation that formerly had been dominated by Disney in the 1930s and 1940s. Interestingly, these films were not only translated into several languages and embraced around the globe for decades, they were also pirated across the Iron Curtain.

Several papers asked what kind of methodology was needed for the analysis of these diverse corpora of films. CHRISTIAN BONAHE (University of Strasbourg) elaborated on a rich corpus of industrial and “Kulturfilme” from the Bayer archives. Pointing to the problematic relation of film and propaganda, particularly in the first half of the 20th century, he suggested a methodological “double disentanglement” between propaganda and information and

proposed to investigate these films as “an archeology of practices”. Ostherr further discussed the “different functions of animation in the practice of biopower”.

Since the meanings of films can change according to their viewing context, one of the many questions the symposium tackled was, how films addressed different national and cultural contexts, and how these films were perceived. Looking at the amalgamation of debates around sex, gender and commerce in the film *The End of the Road* (USA 1918), MIRIAM POSNER (Emory University, Atlanta, GA) not only raised questions about audience reception and public censorship. She also discussed the distribution of the film in a variety of versions and its translation into several languages. The conference participants discussed the changing meanings in the ensuing debates around this film in cross-national contexts and debated whether there was a specific American moral panic at play in the film.

Of major interest was the debate on these films as an essentially modern practice. Drawing on a 20-year project of film research, ELIZABETH LEBAS (Middlesex University, London) talked about interwar British municipal film programs. Starting with the creation of the Ministry of Health in 1919 local authorities began to regard themselves as responsible for the education, health and moral welfare of their citizens. As a means of persuasion these educators were convinced that film as the modern medium per se could communicate the message that “being healthy was to be modern”. As non-commercial products originating in the communities the films were often shown for a long period of time and seen by viewers who were seen as citizens and not as customers.

In his discussion of films about alcoholism, ALEXANDRE SUMPFF (University of Strasbourg) pointed out that in the early Soviet Union an equal understanding of healthy behavior as modern behavior constructing a form of socialist modernity prevailed. Film was regarded as the only art form able to contribute to the prevention of illness. Importantly, Sumpf further raised the problem of an urban/rural divide in the perception of health films. The assumption that these films should be regarded as products of modernity (many of them aiming at the individual in an effort to evoke individual responsibility) was an underlying commonality of most papers presented at the conference. Contemporary producers, filmmakers and health professionals shared the belief that film was a powerful modern medium and it was debated, whether public health film scholars are simply repeating this discourse.

Looking at film as participant in a discourse on the city as a “medicalizable object” VINZENZ HEDIGER (University of Bochum) investigated a series of films from the early to mid-20th century that draw on the idea of the city as unsafe and unhealthy space. Hediger regarded film as contributor to a kind of “sensory discipline” that is “part and parcel of the discourse of hygiene” of the time.

SUSAN LEDERER (University of Madison, WI) chose to leave established paths in the scholarship on well-known Atomic Age films such as *A is for Atom* (USA, 1953) or *Duck and Cover* (USA, 1952). She investigated how these now essential elements of Cold War visual culture discussed the beneficial claims of nuclear medicine.

The conference also provided room for more quantitative assessments of the field of health education films. Starting with an analysis of Nazi military hygiene, URSULA VON KEITZ (University of Bonn) investigated the role of educational films and Kulturfilm as parts of health education in both post-war German states. In view of a large corpus of post-World War Two films, she not only raised questions about the aesthetic forms of those films but also

questions how changing concepts of gendered bodies were articulated in these films.

Next to film analysis, narrative strategies and film as discourse participant, the difficulties of film production, distribution and archiving were also discussed. The aspect of film production and distribution was particularly raised by DAVID CANTOR (History Office, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, MD). Investigating the Eastern Film Corporation as one of the early production companies of public health and medical films he provided an insight into understanding the serpentine paths of many production companies, their business decisions and their role in the market.

The demand on archives for audiovisual material of all kind is ever increasing. However, the collecting and curatorial processes, technological and archival difficulties, processes of donation, storage, and subject indexing are not always comprehensible to researchers. Presenting a history of the National Library of Medicine's Historical Audiovisual Collection, PAUL THEERMAN (National Library of Medicine, Bethesda, MD) helped to gain an insight into these processes. Through the continuing process of digitization more and more films are becoming widely available on the Internet. The panel raised ethical questions about the usage of these medical and public health films in the Youtube Age.

In the lively debates it was concluded that the conference covered considerable mileage in mapping the territory, complexity and potential of public health and medical film research. With regard to the hybridity of the audiovisual material, the different production and distribution contexts, the problems of archival research and the general interdisciplinarity of the field the necessity of knowledge production as a collaborative effort was ascertained. Both the idea of the establishment of a network on public health and medical film research and the announcement that the outcomes of the conference will be published, were therefore received with great enthusiasm.

[1] Timothy Boon, *Films of Fact. A History of Science in Documentary Film and Television*, London (2008); Lisa Cartwright, *Screening the Body. Tracing Medicine's Visual Culture*, Minneapolis, MN (1995); Ramon Reichert, *Im Kino der Humanwissenschaften. Studien zur Medialisierung wissenschaftlichen Wissens*, Bielefeld (2007).

Conference Overview

Vincent Lowy, University of Strasbourg, France

Facing Hollywood Golden Age Aesthetics: John Ford's 'Sex Hygiene' (1941) and the Question of Singularities, Contexts and Methods of Health Education Films

Panel 1: Campaigns: Strategies and Practices

Miriam Posner, Emory University, Atlanta, USA

Educational Prophylaxis" and "Mental Inoculation": Vaccine Metaphors in World War One Hygiene Films

Anita Gertiser, University of Zurich, Switzerland

Going for the Heart Strings - How Emotions Are Employed in Educational Films

Ursula von Keitz, University of Bonn, Germany
Cinema and Health Education in West and East Germany from 1945 to 1955

Susan Lederer, University of Madison Wisconsin, USA
Radiating Health: Public Health and Mass Destruction in the 1950s

Panel 2: Production and Distribution

David Cantor, History Office, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, USA
Between Movies, Markets, and Medicine: The Eastern Film Corporation, Frank A Tichenor,
and Medical and Health Films in the 1920s

Timothy Boon, Science Museum, London, Great Britain
The Culture of Health Education Filmmaking and Reception in Britain, 1914-1951

Kirsten Ostherr, Rice University Houston, TX, USA
The Biopolitics of Animation: Global Health and Sponsored Films in the Postwar Era
Paul Theerman Images and Archives Section, History of Medicine Division, National Library
of Medicine, Bethesda, USA
The Historical Medical Films of the National Library of Medicine

Panel 3: Reception and Spectatorship

Alexandre Sumpf, University of Strasbourg, France
Soviet Cinema and Social Hygiene Against Alcoholism in New Economic Policy-Era Russia

Anja Laukoetter, Max Planck Institute for Human Development, Berlin, Germany
Measuring Knowledge and Emotions. Audience Research on Educational Films in the
Beginning of the 20th Century

Vinzenz Hediger, University of Bochum, Germany
The Smell of Poverty. Cinema, Olfaction, and the Discourse on Public Hygiene in Early
Cinema

Scott Curtis, Northwestern University, USA
Acting Out: Performance and Identification in the Postwar Mental Health Film

Michael Sappol, National Library of Medicine, Bethesda, USA
Difficult Subjects: Showing, Viewing and the Moral Effects of the Medical Cinema of
Disease and Suffering

Panel 4: Communication Techniques: Information – Commercialization – Propaganda

Elizabeth Lebas , Middlesex University, London, Great Britain
Where There's Life, There's Soap': Municipal Public Health Films in Britain, 1920- 1954

Christian Bonah, University of Strasbourg, France

Propaganda in the Service of Humanity. Promoting and Advertising Health in Industrial and Corporate Films from the 1920s to the 1950s

Jan Multmeier/Odette Wegwarth/Wolfgang Gaissmaier, Max-Planck-Institute for Human Development Berlin, Germany

Can Audio-Visual Information about Health Ever Be Neutral Enough to 'Educate' Rather than 'Persuade'?